



Citation for published version:

Nevola, F 2010, 'Book Review: The cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A study in civil religion', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 178-178. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022046909991916>

DOI:

[10.1017/s0022046909991916](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022046909991916)

Publication date:

2010

[Link to publication](#)

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This paper has been accepted for publication and appears in a revised form, subsequent to editorial input by Cambridge University Press, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* published by Cambridge University Press, 61 (1), p. 178.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022046909991916>

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Review by Fabrizio Nevola (University of Bath):

Gerald Parsons, *The cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A study in civil religion*, Aldershot and Burlington (VT) (Ashgate), 2008

With *The cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A study in civil religion*, Gerald Parsons returns to themes central to his 2004 *Siena, Civil Religion and the Sienese*, focussing his attention on the development of only one cult, but extending its reaches outside the walls of the South-Tuscan city to touch the rest of Italy and Europe. The cultural siting of devotional practices within specific socio-political environments is a key concept for the study of local saints' cults in Medieval and Early Modern Italy, as numerous scholars have shown for the civic devotion of numerous centres. Parsons' study is innovative as it spans a vast chronological sweep, from the lifetime of Caterina Benincasa (born 1347), to the early twenty-first century. In so doing, the author traces the story of this urban letter-writing mystic, as her growing reputation was established first within a largely local, Sienese and Dominican setting, and then subsequently as patron saint of Italy (1939) and then of Europe (1999). The first chapter – spanning 1384-1857 – primarily addresses the establishment of Catherine as a *santa cittadina* of Siena, and uses visual evidence to mark the subtle and diplomatic ways in which the Sienese authorities charted the phases that led to her canonisation and the acceptance of different aspects of her spiritual biography (including the debate around her stigmatisation, only approved by Pope Urban VIII in 1630, p. 36-8). The major thrust of the book however, considers the saint's more recent fortunes; chapters 2-4 cover the period from 1859 and amount to 4/5ths of the book. Arguing largely from written sources – the emerging tradition of critical editions and commentaries of her works, as well as journalism and archival documents – Parsons shows convincingly how Catherine's famous plea to reunite the church and return the papacy to Rome came to be a primary motive for her identification as a proto-Italian. After a first wave of this trend in revisiting her hagiography around the unification of Italy, the mixture became ever more heady during the Fascist era and into WWII, as Catherine's perceived nationalism offered a helpful role model that side-stepped the often thorny divide between church and state in Mussolini's Italy. In post-war Italy, the stress returned to peace and her role as a mediator, and led to her proclamation by Pope John Paul II as co-patron of Europe in 1999. As Parsons' suggests, to read this as a one-way trajectory that distanced Catherine from her very local roots in Siena's wool-working district of Fontebranda is misleading. Sienese intercessors throughout this long process were decisive in shaping her narrative to suit the rhetoric and devotional needs of different ages, while inevitably promoting Caterina "da Siena" on an ever-broader devotional public. Thus, in many ways, that very "civic" process that led to her canonisation under the Sienese Pope Pius II in 1461, continued in the *campanilismo* that promoted her fortunes at different

times, in the final instance advanced through the support of a Sienese vice-president of the European Parliament.